

Communities for Children Bendigo



Children's Language and Literacy Project

Project Summary, Impacts and Insights

2015-2020

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1. Introduction

1.1. Why was this project developed?

The 2013 State of Bendigo's Children report revealed that Bendigo children rank lower than the Victoria average on a number of developmental indicators, including language development, cognitive skills, communication and general knowledge. Research indicates that language and literacy skill development during the early years plays a crucial role in achieving optimum health and wellbeing for individuals and communities.

To help address these issues the Communities for Children (C4C) Bendigo Language and Literacy Project commenced in February 2015. The key role of C4C Language and Literacy project worker was to implement the C4C Early Years Literacy and Language Development Strategy (EYLLD).

1.2. Why it sits with Bendigo Health?

Bendigo Health, as a key provider of regional health care, are positioned well to support, deliver and provide access to early literacy resources and education to families with young children through existing services and programs. Bendigo Health is the place of birth of approximately 1500 babies every year. This gives Bendigo Health the unique opportunity to provide the first literacy education to all families regardless of socio-economic status, vulnerability, cultural diversity or parental educational background.

Initially the project worker was employed in the Allied Health, Speech Pathology Department. In early 2017, the position moved to the Aboriginal Services, Diversity and Health Promotion Department at Bendigo Health.

1.3. The Project

The key purpose of this project was to support the implementation of the *C4C Children's Language and Literacy Development Strategy* in conjunction with the C4C Facilitating Partner and agencies. The Strategy's focus was to build awareness of children's language and literacy needs amongst families experiencing vulnerability, Aboriginal families and within the wider community. To support this the Project worker developed processes and structures to enable all families with newborns have access to information and resources to support their children's language and literacy development.

1.3.1. The aims of the project

- To promote the key message: children's language and literacy development is everyone's business.
- Develop processes and structures to ensure all families with newborns have access to information and resources to support children's language and literacy development.
- Build community awareness and understanding of children's language and literacy development and needs.
- Support vulnerable children and families by providing information and resources to support their children's language and literacy development.

1.4. Staff involved:

Since 2015 project staff have included:

- Sandra Harvey - 2015-2017
- Gabby Barrett - 2017- 2018 & 2019-2020
- Sophie Hickingbotham - 2018-2019 (maternity cover)
- Hayley Davis - 2019 (maternity cover)

Supported by: Melinda Charlesworth (Chief Speech Pathologist, Manager of Audiology) and Andy Sloane (Director – Aboriginal Services, Diversity and Health Promotion,

2. SUMMARY OF ACTIVITIES

2015

Early Year’s Language and Literacy Development (EYLLD) Strategy for Bendigo

The EYLLD strategy was developed by the Communities for Children (C4C) Literacy and Language Development working group and the C4C Reference Committee, and was officially launched in August 2015. It was the culmination of a two-year consultation process with the early year’s sector, and data was retrieved from a number of sources including Australian Bureau of Statistics and State of Bendigo’s Children Report (2013). The strategy focuses on early literacy and language development promotion, particularly for families with children aged 0-5years old living in Bendigo region.

Dolly Parton Imagination Library (DPIL)

The DPIL was officially launched in conjunction with the EYLLD Strategy. Each month DPIL delivers a high-quality, age-appropriate book in the mail, free of charge to enrolled children from birth to age five. DPIL is a joint effort between United Way and began in Australia in 2014. DPIL Bendigo is coordinated by a local volunteer who is responsible for enrolling children and securing funding to cover that cost of the program. The DPIL cost approximately \$9 per month per child enrolled.

Books for Babies

Books for Babies (B4B) is an early intervention program that provides a board book to every family with a newborn at St John of God Hospital Bendigo and Bendigo Health. B4B also includes, tips on reading to babies, library registration information, story time schedule and local literacy resources. B4B complements the Victorian State Government Baby Bundles initiative introduced in 2019 aimed at first time parents.

The B4B program requires annual funding of approximately \$10,000-\$15,000 per annum and is currently funded by the Community Enterprise Foundations.

Book Box Libraries

The Book Box Library Program (BBL) was established with the aim of increasing access to free children's books for the community. BBLs are a mini-library constructed from recycled timber, filled with donated books and placed in foyers and waiting rooms. BBL allows children and parents the opportunity to interact with books in environments they are naturally attending.

Community group Bendigo KIWANIS Club are a key partner in the program and have been pivotal in establishing the Bendigo BBL program. The BBLs are constructed by volunteers using donated materials and decorated by community members.

Language and Literacy Working Group

The C4C Language and Literacy working group was established. The working group focuses on supporting initiatives within the C4C Early Year's Language and Literacy Development (EYLLD) Strategy for Bendigo and provides advice & guidance around the various language and literacy projects.

2016

Bendigo Reads Website

Designed as an early literacy information hub and community resource easily accessible to families with young children. The website provides early literacy information, local literacy program details and local services that support early language and literacy development. The website is updated by the Language and Literacy Project Worker.

Sam the Story Tram

Sam the Story Tram (STST) was developed through a collaborative partnership between the Bendigo Writers Festival (BWF) and Communities for Children (C4C) Bendigo with the support of local community and business. STST is an interactive storytelling tram ride for Bendigo pre-schoolers and has been successfully delivered leading up to the Bendigo Writers Festival from 2016-2019.

Funding for this program relies heavily on yearly grant applications, financial support from local businesses and volunteering hours.

Let's Read

Designed to increase home literacy resources and build the capacity of families and professionals to foster children's emergent literacy skills. *Let's Read* aims to address the additional literacy challenges faced by children growing up in low socio-economic households and communities. *Let's Read* is a training program for professionals and provides information about the importance of early literacy and how to engage with families and caregivers to help them to support their children's literacy development.

**This program ceased in Bendigo in 2019.*

2017

Short & Sharps Information Sessions

Short and sharp sessions conducted with staff on maternity wards, including midwives, ward attendees and volunteers. The session provide these staff with information about the importance of early language development, with a specific focus on the importance of the first 1000 days of life, available local services for families to support children's language development and how new parents can engage with their newborns using Books for Babies packs. Short and Sharp sessions run for 30minutes, with approximately 6 sessions each year.

Literacy Champion Project

In 2017, C4C Bendigo consulted with C4C 'Parents for Change' Advocacy Group and community members to develop a 'Literacy Champion' project. The project was designed to engage community members interested in improving children's literacy and language outcomes in Bendigo. A pilot Literacy Champion project was launched in Bendigo in December 2017 and a complete program launched in Heathcote in 2018, supported by Regional Development Victoria.

The project focused on:

- Supporting families to access services to help children and parents/carers where there are concerns about a child's literacy and language development.
- Promoting early literacy and language in the community.
- Available community programs that enhance early literacy and language development

2018

Pre and postnatal information sessions – First 100 Day of Life

Information sessions for prenatal and postnatal groups at St John of God Bendigo and Bendigo Health providing information on the importance of interacting with language and literacy in the first 1000 days of a baby's life with tools and resources for new parents.

2019

Community Awareness Campaign – Read, Sing, Talk, Play: Together Every Day

The '*Read, Sing, Talk, Play: Together Every Day*' awareness campaign was created to promote the importance of early literacy and language development in the Bendigo Community. The campaign aims to raise awareness and consistent messaging to community members on what they can do to promote healthy children's language and literacy development and healthy brain development.

The *Read, Sing, Talk, Play: Together Every Day* campaign features a new logo design, social media advertising, development of cinema advert and dissemination of promotional collateral (postcards, bags and magnets).

The campaign was funded by City of Greater Bendigo community grant.

**Due to COVID19 official launch and cinema advertising of campaign has been deferred.*

3. PROJECT IMPACTS

3.1. Data

- There are currently **87** Book Box Libraries in the City of Great Bendigo region.
- In 2019, over **1800** Books for Babies packs were delivered to families in Bendigo.
- A total of **22** Literacy Champion training sessions delivered, over **145** people participated in the training.
- First 1000 Days of Life Workshops: **92** new parents attended the workshops.
- On average a total of **300** pre-schoolers and parents/carers ride Sam the Story tram each year.

3.2. Outcomes

In relation to the C4C Bendigo Theory of Change, the project has influenced many of the identified outcomes.

- *Organisations and businesses have engaged and committed to increase/promote children's literacy?*

Businesses and organisations have engaged with children's literacy through the various C4C language and literacy programs including the Book Box Libraries, Sam the Story Tram and Dolly Parton Imagination Library.

- *Children and families are getting access to multiple programs and supports around their child's language development*

There are a number of programs that families can access to support children language development. The Bendigo Reads website is a great resource to direct families to local language support services and resources.

Local programs and supports that families can access include, Sam the Story Tram, Book Box Library Program, Goldfield Library Programs – i.e. story-time sessions, outreach services and holiday programs, Speaking Spot, Books for Babies, Parent Child Mother Goose Program, Off To An Early Start Program (OTAES) and Dolly Parton Imagination Library.

- *Early Years' service providers have the information, skills and capacity to support language development.*

Maternal and Child Health Nurses support the Books for Babies program and disseminate information to clients to support language development including: Bendigo Reads website and local language and literacy programs available for families. Short and sharp sessions provide staff with information about the importance of early language development, with a specific focus on the importance of the first 1000 days of life. There are a number of Early Years' services providers hosting Book Box Libraries, supporting reading with children locally.

4. CURRENT PROJECT WORKER INSIGHTS

4.1. Achievements

- Numerous activities and programs implemented from 2015-2020, reaching a vast number of families with children aged 0-5 years in Bendigo.
- Relationships built with key workers and organisations that support language and literacy work locally such as Goldfields Library, Speech Pathologist and Early Years' Service providers.
- Implementation of programs that support parents/caregivers to engage with children to support their language and literacy development.
- The development of clear and consistent messaging around the importance of interacting with children 'read, sing, talk, play together every day' campaign.

4.2. Learnings

- The important role that raising awareness of early language and literacy development- community needs to understand why early year's language and literacy development is so important to the health of the Bendigo Community - now and into the future.
- The need to consolidate networks and map the current language and literacy landscape, helping to identify where the gaps are and how we can advocate for future funding to support language and literacy in the early years space.
- Create a coordinated local approach to children's literacy and language to ensure coordinated efforts occur in this space. Work has started in this space, but requires continued effort.\

4.3. Future Opportunities

- Strengthen links within Bendigo Health i.e. align plans with allied health/health professionals/paediatric clinics.
- CALD communities - focus on ways to engage and support CALD families to ensure they have necessary resources to support their child's language and literacy development.

- Continue focus on community awareness of early year's children's language development, building on the 'Read, Sing, Talk, Play Together Every Day' campaign.
- Further mapping of touch points that exist for families with children 0-5 years. Helping to ensure future engagement with families occurs at points that parents/carers are already naturally connecting with the sector.
- First 1000 days of life – provide more workshops/training to new parents and relevant health workers.

4.4. Strengths

- A major strength of this project is that it is located at Bendigo Health, which allows access to children and families regardless of socio-economic status, vulnerability, cultural diversity or parental educational background.
- Working with a number of agencies and across sectors has been valuable and rewarding experience. It has allowed for sharing of resources and information that would not have otherwise happened and has given me a greater understanding of different agencies/sectors.
- We can have a positive impact on early language and literacy development, through educating and empowering families to support their child's development from birth.

4.5. Challenges

- Conflicting interests/more urgent needs (housing, food etc.) language and literacy is not always seen as an essential element in childhood development.
- There are number of language and literacy strategies/plans/committees - i.e. The Yearly Years Compact, Bendigo Education Plan, Education City, Regional Development Victoria Loddon Campaspe Language and Literacy Strategy - making it a confusing landscape.
- Lacking a coordinated approach in addressing the literacy and language needs of children particularly for children aged 0 to 5 years in Bendigo. Need to create a collaborative regional approach to children's literacy and language development to ensure coordinated efforts occur in this space.
- EFT – Limited flexibility of project worker to conduct training/workshops due to part-time nature of work.
- Constantly seeking funding to support program continuation can be time consuming and demanding on the project worker.

5. Summary

The Language and Literacy project has played an important role in supporting early language and literacy development. The multi-pronged approach of the project has allowed for the implementation of various projects, programs and initiatives to support early language and literacy in the Bendigo Community.
